

Grammar Nuggets

To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate, That Is the Question

By Kathy Sieckman, PP, PLS-SC, ACP

Another confusing proofreading issue is hyphenated words. This is particularly true when the words are sometimes hyphenated and sometimes are not depending on how the word is used. There are, of course, rules regarding hyphenation.

- Always hyphenate *ex*, *elect*, and *designate* when attaching them to titles. For example “*ex-President Carter*.”
- You can also use “*then*” before a title to indicate that the person was acting in that capacity at the time you are describing. Used in this way, it will be hyphenated when it would be confusing otherwise.
 - *Then Governor Mecham* was impeached in Arizona. This could be read to mean that Governor Mecham’s impeachment happened next.
 - *Then-Governor Mecham* was impeached in Arizona. This would be read to mean that Governor Mecham was acting governor at the time he was impeached.
- Family titles starting with *grand* (such as *grandmother*) are written without a hyphen; however, family titles starting with *great* (like *great-grandmother*) are written WITH a hyphen for each *great* (for instance her *great-great-grandmother*).
- When used as nouns, terms such as *African Americans* or *French Canadians* are not hyphenated. When they are used as adjectives such as *African-American politicians* or *French-Canadian residents*, they would be hyphenated.
- Other noun phrases are hyphenated where the same sequence of words in a verb phrase are not. For example:
 - *Let’s plan a get-together.*
 - *Let’s plan to get together.*
 - *I flew standby to Hawaii.*
 - *I cannot stand by and watch the wrong document be filed.*
- Fractions written out would be hyphenated, such as *one-third* and *three-fifths*.
- Compound numbers such as *thirty-five* and *six hundred eighty-four* should be hyphenated.
- An age that modifies a noun is hyphenated.
 - *My 40-year-old neighbor* has three barking dogs.
- An age that is an adjective phrase that comes after the noun is not hyphenated.
 - *My granddaughter* will be 13 years old soon.
 - *The twins* are two years old.

The biggest hyphenation issue that I see consistently is third party. Hyphenating third party depends on how it is used.

- When third party is used as a modifier, it should be hyphenated.
 - *The bill for the third-party vendor* was past due.
- It would NOT be hyphenated when not used as a modifier.
 - *The bill was sent to the third party* for payment directly to the vendor.

For an easy test to see if the phrase is a modifier that requires a hyphen, try each part of the modifier alone with the noun. If it does not make sense, you need a hyphen. If it DOES make sense, then you do not use a hyphen:

- In the example above, *third vendor* does not make sense so *third-party vendor* should be hyphenated.
- She prefers *high-quality clothing*. *High clothing* does not make sense so *high-quality* should be hyphenated.

Another tip is where you are not sure whether or not a phrase is hyphenated or whether or not a compound word is one word or two and you are getting different results from different dictionaries, do a Google search at <http://news.google.com> and choose the option to search news. There you will see current common usage to help you make the decision.

Kathy Sieckman, PP, PLS-SC, ACP, has been a Member of NALS for over 25 years and is currently serving as Chair of the Basic Legal Training Course Task Force and Co-Chair of the 2015 Las Vegas Conference Task Force. Kathy has a blog on proofreading tips at <http://proofthatblog.com>. If you have specific grammar issues you would like covered in future issues, please send them to Kathy at proofthatblog@gmail.com.